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SUBJECT: IRAQ/ITALY: FM FINI SPEAKS TO PARLIAMENT ON
NICOLA CALIPARI INCIDENT

REFTEL: ROME 781

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified, please protect accordingly.

12. (U) Summary: DPM/FM Gianfranco Fini told the Chamber of Deputies March 8 that the March 4 killing by a U.S. patrol of Italian SISMI official Nicola Calipari near Camp Victory in Baghdad was "certainly an accident" but that there were discrepancies between the U.S. and Italy's reconstruction of events. Fini underscored the need to shed full light on the incident, said U.S. Ambassador in Rome Mel Sembler is of the same opinion, and remarked that the U.S. is willing to cooperate. Fini also said the incident should not be linked to Italy's military presence in Iraq. End summary.

13. (U) FM Fini appeared before the Italian Lower House of Parliament the morning of March 8 to provide the Italian Government's reconstruction of the events on the evening of March 4 which led to the death of Italian military intelligence (SISMI) official Nicola Calipari as he was approaching Baghdad airport with just-released Italian hostage Giuliana Sgrena. Fini gave a detailed account of Calipari's movements and those of his SISMI colleague since the moment of their arrival at Baghdad airport the afternoon of March 4. Fini reported that in Baghdad "SISMI complied with the Government's instructions and according to procedures used in previous circumstances and acted in synergy with the allied forces and with the U.S. Embassy's hostage center." He described the retrieval of hostage Giuliana Sgrena in an unidentified and dark part of Baghdad. He then gave a meticulous account of their return trip to the airport, saying Calipari had decided to fly back to Italy immediately with the former hostage "because they assessed that it would have been more dangerous to go to the Italian Embassy instead, as they would have had to drive for at least thirty minutes at night in one of the most dangerous sectors of Baghdad." Calipari sat on the back seat of the car with the ex-hostage. The other SISMI official was in front, driving. Both were Iraq experts, had been there numerous times before, and knew the roads. They had decided to travel in an unmarked car with Iraq plates -- a Toyota Corolla -- to be as undetectable as possible, for the safety of the ex-hostage.

14. (U) According to Fini, the Toyota was traveling at a speed of about 70 km/hr when it first entered the road to Camp Victory. The headlights were on, as was the light inside the car "to make it easier for possible controls at checkpoints -- but there were no checkpoints -- and to allow Calipari to make several telephone calls." Calipari called Italian Government Under Secretary Gianni Letta and SISMI Chief Nicolo' Pollari and "informed the American authorities of their proximate return to the airport area, in order to obtain all possible assistance for a smooth and direct entry."

15. (U) The car reduced its speed to go through a flooded underpass and further reduced it "in view of a road junction with a practically 90 degree turn." At that point, it was on the left lane of the road, because the right lane was flooded and because it "was obstructed by two cement blocs that the driver knew were there from before." By then, the car was going "not more than 40 km/hr." "About half way through the bend a very strong light, like a spotlight, was lit, higher than the car and about 10 meters away, probably on the right side of the road. Shooting from more than one automatic weapon started practically immediately when the car braked and stopped, and lasted 10-15 seconds," Fini said.

16. (U) Describing those "hectic and tragic" moments, Fini said the driver saw tracing bullets pass in front of his chest and over his legs, before he was ordered to get out of the car and kneel on the ground about 10 meters away. When the driver, who spoke English, was finally able to identify himself and Calipari "as belonging to the Italian Embassy" and to say that the woman they were transporting was ex-hostage Sgrena "two young American soldiers approached him and dejectedly and repeatedly apologized for what happened." "It is still not ascertained" whether the

soldiers who opened fire "were truly operating within a complex mechanism of control" or whether they were operating alone. Nevertheless, the hypothesis circulating in Italian leftist circles that it was an ambush to deliberately kill either Calipari or Sgrenna is "absolutely unfounded." It was, instead, "certainly an accident... determined by a series of circumstances... but this does not impede that clarity be made."

17. (U) Recognizing that the Italian Government's reconstruction "does not completely coincide with what the American authorities have communicated," and on the strength of Italy's "ancient and reiterated friendship with the U.S.," Fini underscored the Italian Government's absolute determination to "claim truth and justice." He indicated that the U.S. has shown an "immediate and real willingness to cooperate," which was transmitted during President Bush's telcon with Italian PM Berlusconi, Secretary Rice's telcon with Fini himself, and Secretary

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Rumsfeld's telcon with Italian MOD Antonio Martino, as well as during Ambassador Sembler's meeting with Berlusconi, where Sembler "underscored the need to shed light on Nicola Calipari's death and on the fact that there must be no shadows." Fini also said there is no connection between the presence of Italian troops in Iraq and Sgrenna's kidnapping. He suggested that the Government's position on maintaining its troops in Iraq as long as the Iraqi government requests that they remain will not change.

18. (U) Fini was applauded only by the center-right majority parties, who espoused his statements in full. He was criticized by the left, but not too vehemently: they insisted on the need to investigate whether the incident was deliberate and was meant to kill. Italian Communist (PdCI) and former Justice Minister Oliviero Diliberto asked for the withdrawal of the Italian troops from Iraq and noted that Fini "belied" the U.S. version of events. Paolo Cento, for the Greens, characterized Fini's reconstruction as "insufficient and inadequate." Ramon Mantovani, for Communist Renewal (RC), appreciated the Government's decision to negotiate with the kidnappers to save a human life, but said that the events happened "in a context of war" and RC is against war and against maintaining troops in Iraq. But Luciano Violante, of the opposition's leading party, the Democrats of the Left (DS), gave the opposition's leading line, remarking that Fini's speech "merits respect," but that Fini did not address one key point -- on whether there is unity of intent between Italy and the U.S. in how to deal with hostage situations. He also said he would wait for PM Berlusconi's speech at the Senate the afternoon of March 9 to know more, including on the U.S. Embassy Baghdad's Hostage Task Force, which Fini had briefly mentioned in his speech.

19. (SBU) Comment: Fini presented in detail perhaps more complete than we would have liked the differences between the accounts of U.S. and Italian witnesses to the events, but did not attribute more veracity to either version. He made clear that Italy would participate in an investigation into the causes of the tragedy, an important factor in answering the call from the Italian public for transparency. While Italian and U.S. press (including CNN) may have focused on a "dispute" between U.S. and Italian explanations, in our view Fini simply noted the obvious: that discrepancies exist among the various versions of the events. Fini underlined that Italy agreed with the U.S. that the accident was "a tragic mistake", and that the circumstances must be clarified.

110. (SBU) Comment continued. We believe there was also an element of political theater in Fini's address. His iteration of the Italian witness' account preempted any opposition thoughts of accusing the government of a cover-up, and set the stage for Berlusconi to underline that he has received from the U.S. assurances of full transparency and Italian participation in the investigation, and that Italy's promise to remain in Iraq as long as Baghdad requires remains firm.

111. (U) Embassy Baghdad minimize considered.

Sembler

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